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STATINTL

ANNALS OF WAR

VIETNAM

V~SURVIVORS

BY the fall of 1968, much of the American public felt that the issue of the war had been settled. With the withdrawal of Lyndon Johnson from the Presidential election, the American peace movement had, as one analyst said, come as close to overthrowing the government as can happen within the American system. During the primary campaigns of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, the movement seemed on the verge of becoming a majority. Even after the assassination of Senator Kennedy and the victory in the nominating conventions of two long-term hawks, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon, the pressure for peace remained constant. Just before the election, President Johnson took the important steps of establishing a negotiating table in Paris and stopping the bombing of the North. The train of events seemed irreversible. Nixon came to the Presidency with a promise to end the war, and most Americans believed that he would end it, if only because it was for nothing.

But the war did not end. It expanded and grew bloodier. In the first three years of Nixon's Administration, fifteen thousand Americans were killed. In that same period, the South Vietnamese armed forces lost more men than they had lost in the three previous years and more than the total of American dead in Vietnam. In those three years, there were more than four hundred thousand South Vietnamese civilian casualties, and an unknown number of Laotians, Cambodians, and North Vietnamese were killed and wounded, making the over-all total of civilian casualties higher than that for any previous three-year period of the war. In 1970, two years after the start of the peace talks in Paris, the Vietnam war became the Indo-China war, with major battles in three countries. By 1971, the governments of Indo-China had more than two million men under arms; the po-

litical and social geography of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam had changed more radically than it had changed in all the years of the Johnson Administration.

How was it possible? It was possible because the American government did not want to face the consequences of peace. After all, it was one thing to wish for an end to the war and quite another to confront the issues upon which the war had begun. President Johnson had wanted to end the war; so, too, had President Kennedy. But to end the war and not to lose it. The distinction was crucial, and particularly crucial after all the American lives that had been lost and all the political rhetoric that had been expended. Nixon, perhaps even more than his predecessors, felt that he could not take the responsibility for "losing the war." "Johnson got us into the war quietly, now we are trying to get out of it quietly," said Henry Kissinger. But the time for Senator George Aiken's solution—simply declaring that the Allies had won and leaving—had long since passed; the issues were all too clearly formulated. To withdraw support from Saigon and allow the Thieu government to fall would be, by Nixon's definition, to "lose the war." There remained the hope of winning it, or, failing that, of not losing it until sometime after an American withdrawal from Vietnam.

POLITICALLY unable to recharge the war to meet the specifications of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a quick military victory, Nixon adopted a policy of scaling down the participation of American ground troops while increasing every other form of military pressure on the enemy. His aim was still to force Hanoi to accept an American-supported government in Saigon, and his strategy was still that of attrition. In fact, his policy involved little more than a change of tactics—and a change

that originated not with him but with President Johnson, in the summer of 1968.

The keystone of this policy was "Vietnamization," the ironic name for the slow withdrawal of American ground troops and the buildup of Vietnamese armed forces to fight an American-directed war in their stead. It was, of course, the same strategy the French officials had attempted in 1950, when the war began to seem too expensive and too politically divisive for their country. And it was the same strategy that led to the situation the United States took over in 1954. Still, the Americans enjoyed a much greater military advantage than the French did. At the height of their strength in 1968-69, the Americans had the troops, the air power, and the money to maintain the Saigon government over a number of years, even with a schedule of troop pull-outs. Most important of all, Nixon found a measure of support for his policy in the United States. As was calculated, the American troop withdrawals cut what might be called the middle-of-the-road doves off from the peace movement, for it indicated to them that Nixon intended to end the war. At the same time, Nixon's assurance that he would not abandon the South Vietnamese convinced many hawks that he had found a way to win the war without using American ground troops. Nixon's campaign promise to "end the war and

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